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ABSTRACT

Independent reading is a necessary adjunct to a school reading program. If carried out with commitment, it can greatly influence students' lifetime reading habits. Unfortunately, today's educators are so involved with reading instruction and competency testing that independent or recreational reading may become a lost art. This paper asserts that principals should be directly involved in providing staff development, supporting the link between independent and creative reading, promoting schoolwide efforts, and being realistic about how to proceed. In one plan, blocks of independent reading time are spaced throughout the school year in a variety of subjects. For this plan to succeed, classrooms must be organized as circulating minilibraries. Teachers must serve as reading models while students are reading silently. Teachers can also vary the routine by reading aloud sections of an interesting book, motivating individuals to discuss their books, or encouraging students to serve as journalists for a classroom newspaper. Commitment to such a plan suggests the need for an administrator who is knowledgeable, has courage, and relates well to teachers. Although the principal's leadership is not a panacea, it can significantly affect our society's future literacy. Included are nine references. (MLH)

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Schoolwide Independent Reading:
The Principal Can Help

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Independent reading is an important part of the total reading program because it supports the theme that children learn to read by reading. It also promotes the lifetime habit of reading. Unfortunately, educators throughout the United States are so involved with teaching reading that they frequently neglect the practice of giving children opportunities to read. Although teaching certain skills is important, it should not preclude guiding learners to read for pleasure. Independent reading on a schoolwide basis can have a positive impact on students' reading habits, and the building principal can be a major factor in supporting this essential adjunct to a successful reading program.

According to Hillerich (1983), independent reading provides experiences that are necessary for reading at mature levels. "Even [the] best teachers of reading are wasting their time teaching children how to read if, in the process, they are not helping them want to read and actually getting them to read." (p.99) Supporting this position, Hillerich recommends that independent reading receive equal time with the formal skill or basal component of the school reading program. He also devotes an entire chapter of his book to the role of independent reading.

Unfortunately, principals tend to view independent reading as a frivolous activity that is of use only after skills have been taught. Reinforcing this narrow perspective are state

competency requirements which have pressured administrators into limiting the scope of language arts programs to accommodate these external mandates. In New York State, for example, students are expected to reach specific reference points with the following language arts tests: third grade: Pupil Evaluation Program in Reading; fifth grade: Writing Test for New York State Elementary Schools; sixth grade: Pupil Evaluation Program in Reading; eighth or ninth grade (optional): Preliminary Competency Tests in Reading and Writing; eleventh grade: Regents Competency Tests in Reading and Writing or the Comprehensive Examination in English (optional for students pursuing a Regents Diploma). Students also are required to complete standardized achievement tests selected by schools, and college-bound teenagers are expected to compete successfully with the S.A.T. or the A.C.T. Results are usually published in newspapers suggesting that the worth of the schools is a matter of how well their students achieve with these instruments. Since parents and boards of education are generally interested in the published results, it is not surprising that many principals have narrowed their perceptions of what is essential in the curriculum.

To combat this limited view, those interested with good testing results must continuously be reminded that although productive outcomes are important, they are only one indication of a successful program. If articulated properly, pressure groups will realize that exposing students to skills is useless

unless the students immerse themselves in books. Other points to be made in favor of independent reading are that it helps students to build prior knowledge of topics, to apply learned skills to actual text (narrative, descriptive, expository), to expand reading interests, and, most important, to develop a long-term love of reading. This articulation can take place in a variety of settings, including P.T.S.A. meetings, open house gatherings, curriculum orientations, parent-teacher conferences, and coffee klatches.

When the principal, staff, parents and board members are convinced that independent reading has a positive place in the school program, strategies should be carried out that assure the worth of independent reading throughout the school. The following suggestions are not complete, but they do support the theme of getting students to read:

1. Provide worthwhile staff development. The principal, department supervisors, and volunteers from the content area teaching staff work as a team in planning, implementing, and evaluating inservice activities. This team becomes involved in a variety of activities, such as determining needs assessment techniques and interpreting the results to the faculty. If the need for independent reading is determined, the team develops a structure which typically includes goals and related objectives, activities, and evaluation procedures. (Otto and Erickson, 1973) For example:

A. Identify Needs

Teachers need to increase their awareness of independent reading and ways of getting children to read a diversity of materials in different contexts.

B. Set a Goal

To increase teachers' knowledge of independent reading and to help them devise strategies that will guide students to use independent reading in different content areas.

C. State Objectives

1. To identify aspects of independent reading (classroom library and central library) and to apply them to content area classrooms.
2. To select materials that have merit for independent reading.
3. To employ teaching techniques that will motivate students to use independent reading in the subject areas.

D. Select Activities to Attain Stated Objectives

1. The workshop presenter lectures on the importance of the classroom and central libraries and on how they satisfy a need for availability of books. Included in this lecture is the leadership role of the principal in guiding the school librarian to serve as a major resource for the reading program (Hillerich, 1983).

2. The workshop participants review a variety of materials. During a group discussion, the teachers may observe that certain materials are more appropriate for problem readers, while other resources are useful for average readers. The participants also may read and discuss ideas from the following monographs published by the International Reading Association: Alfred J. Ciani's Motivating Reluctant Readers, John E. Cowen's Teaching Reading through the Arts, Nancy Roser and Margaret Frith's Children's Choices: Teaching with Books Children Like, and Dixie Lee Spiegel's Reading for Pleasure: Guidelines. In addition, teachers are given opportunities to generate lists of materials that are especially useful for their subject areas.
3. Lectures, demonstrations, discussions, recordings, and other inservice activities help the participants gain insights about motivating students to read independently. Motivational considerations include building independent reading into the content area schedule, encouraging self-selection of materials, providing time for students to share reading experiences, serving as reading models during independent reading rather than being seen doing clerical tasks, and extending independent reading into the home.
(Sanacore, 1983)

E. Evaluate Results

The success of this staff development is determined in a number of ways, including teacher responses, performance tests, and observations verifying that the newly gained insights concerning independent reading are benefiting students in content area classrooms. The main reason for evaluation is to judge the degree to which the objectives and, ultimately, the goals are attained; however, evaluation also helps the inservice team to make decisions about conducting future workshop sessions.

This inservice structure is adapted from Otto and Erickson (1973), Sanacore (1982), and Shanker (1982). Its implementation supports the cooperative roles of the principal, supervisors, and staff as they attempt to satisfy the need for encouraging students to read.

2. Use independent reading to promote creative reading. One of the many positive suggestions that may be discussed during staff development is the link between independent reading and creative reading. This link is natural because self-selection of materials establishes the foundation for personal responses to these materials. In addition, this approach provides more opportunities for individuals to read at their own comfortable pace and to reflect on the content of their selections.

During this reflection, students are more likely to become personally involved with their books. The teacher gives support

by posing questions that require readers to go beyond the author's ideas and then by helping the learners to ask similar questions on their own. (Hillerich, 1983; Sanacore, 1986; Smith and Robinson, 1980) For example, the teacher might ask, "How would you have solved this problem?" Imaginative responses represent beginning stages of inquiry and, therefore, are encouraged and praised often. As students develop confidence with their creative reactions, the teacher guides them to ask their own questions that help them actively create meaning as they read.

One way of expanding on this approach is to motivate students to develop additional questions that stimulate personal, creative responses. Adapting a structure devised by Donlan and Singer (1979), the teacher can model questions, such as the following:

- A. The leading character -- If I were the leading character, what action would I have initiated? Why?
- B. The goal -- What would I have strived for? What would I have learned about myself from the goal chosen and from the course of action taken?
- C. The obstacles -- How would I have dealt with the obstacles? What would I have learned about myself from the ways in which I dealt with these obstacles?
- D. The outcome -- Would I have been successful or unsuccessful in reaching the goal? Why?

- E. The theme -- From the goal, obstacles, and outcome, what forces would I have struggled with (for example, myself, nature, other people)?

As learners show readiness for developing and responding to these types of questions, the teacher moves from modeling to providing practice. When students begin to demonstrate independence, the teacher monitors continuity in using the process.

Independent reading in the content areas is a useful approach for encouraging continuity in self-questioning. It allows students to select a wide variety of materials, to read and reflect on the content of their selections, and to apply some of the self-questioning strategies discussed above. Although these strategies are easily applied to narrative text, they can be adapted to expository and descriptive writing. For example, during reading, students can create and answer personal questions, such as:

- A. If I were the author, how would I have approached the problem? What would I have learned about myself from my approach to the problem?
- B. What difficulties would I have experienced in dealing with the problem? How would I have dealt with these difficulties? What would I have learned about myself from the ways in which I dealt with these difficulties?
- C. Would I have been successful or unsuccessful in dealing with the problem? Why?

D. Beyond these experiences, what additional challenges would I have encountered as the author (for instance, my personal lifestyle versus the problem to be researched)?

These types of questions promote thinking at different levels while readers apply their emotional and intellectual backgrounds to varied types of writing. Students may elaborate on an author's ideas, suggest original ways of dealing with an author's thesis, and synthesize concepts from a variety of sources into a broader, related concept (namely, the author's main thesis). Thus, independent reading blended with personal questions and responses can help students better understand and appreciate different texts, as these developing independent readers go beyond the literal, interpretive, and critical levels of comprehension. A caution, however, is not to require excessive questioning, since overdoing this process could negate the principles of independent reading. Rather, teachers should motivate students to read for pleasure and, at times, to apply their creative reading strategies. In addition, the teacher might encourage individuals to share their creative insights during peer-group discussions of books. More discussion about independent or recreational reading in the content areas can be found in Sanacore (1983) and Spiegel (1981).

Principals and teachers who maintain these insights generate a sense that reading is more than basic skill development. Additionally, this broader view of comprehension shows a respect

for students' personal approaches to reading, thereby motivating individuals to be greater risk takers in selecting books and in responding to them. Administrators can favorably influence these practices through faculty meetings, informal observations, and formal evaluations. Identifying and praising positive outcomes are among the best ways of nurturing the continuity of such behaviors.

3. Be ambitious about independent reading. Promoting the link between independent and creative reading is important, but it represents only one dimension of the total process. Principals, supervisors, and staff should also be concerned with supporting schoolwide efforts for independent reading. Since the typical school year consists of four 10-week periods, ambitious teachers can provide about 5 weeks for independent reading in their subject areas. In this plan, the blocks of time allocated for independent reading are spaced throughout the school year (see Figure 1). A student's schedule, therefore, may show independent reading in English for the first 5 weeks and conventional instruction for the next 35 weeks. This student also may have independent reading in social studies for the second 5 weeks and regular instruction before and after that block of time. Thus, the reader is exposed to a wide variety of materials in the different subject areas but, as important, is involved with these resources on a continuous basis from September to June. In addition, other curricular pressures are considered so that

FIGURE 1

Model of a Student's Yearlong Schedule
That Includes Independent Reading

	First Progress Period		Second Progress Period		Third Progress Period		Fourth Progress Period	
1. English	IR							
2. Social Studies		IR						
3. Physical Education			*					
4. Science				IR				
5. Mathematics					IR			
6. Lunch						*		
7. Foreign Language							IR	
8. Elective								IR

Note - Each box represents five weeks

IR - Independent Reading

☐ - Traditional Instruction

* - In this schedule, independent reading is not included in the areas of physical education and lunch, since physical education is offered twice a week and lunch is not an instructional period. These areas, however, are appropriately spaced so that no gap in free reading is longer than 5 weeks. Thus, the student experiences independent reading in all four 10-week progress periods.

This model is adapted from Joseph Sanacore, "How the Principal Can Promote Free Reading in the Content Areas," Journal of Reading, vol. 27 (December 1983), pp. 229-33.

5 weeks of independent reading give teachers and learners 35 weeks to engage in other important activities. Even during the 10-week progress period when the teacher is supporting independent reading, he/she still has another 5 weeks to teach content, administer several quizzes, and record grades. Consequently, some of the difficulties related to perceived lack of time are lessened.

For this plan to be a success, classrooms must be organized as circulating minilibraries. At least five resources for each student should be available, and they should reflect a variety of interest and reading levels. They also should support major curriculum topics so that students are able to build their prior knowledge of pertinent content. Another important aspect of this environment is the teacher serving as a reading model while the students are reading silently. If the teacher is correcting tests or doing other clerical tasks during reading time, he/she is probably generating negative signals concerning the worth of reading. Everyone, therefore, should be reading silently. At appropriate times, however, the teacher may realize a need to vary the classroom routine by reading aloud sections of an interesting book, motivating individuals to talk about their books, encouraging students to serve as journalists for a classroom newspaper, or guiding learners in other worthwhile activities.

Approaching independent reading on such a large-scale basis may seem extreme, but it demonstrates a genuine commitment to this part of the school reading program. Remember, Hillerich (1983) strongly believes that "independent reading should be half of the total program in reading instruction." (p. 100) A dedicated administrator and teaching staff at least will aim toward extending this philosophy to all content areas.

4. Be realistic about independent reading. Sometimes, the limitations of a school lessen the chances for schoolwide efforts. The teaching staff, the board of education, and the budget are only a few of the potential obstacles. Instead of accepting defeat, the principal can modify the initial plan to fit the needs of the school. This modification may include one or more of the following suggestions:

- A. Work with one department at a time until success is achieved, and then use similar approaches with other departments. (Sanacore, 1983) The principal's key role is to coordinate the central library and the classroom minilibrary. A wide variety of books concerning instructional topics should be readily available so that students can fulfill unit requirements during the block of time devoted to independent reading.

One practical way of evaluating the worth of these efforts is to review the departmental grades and to compare periods of independent reading with periods of

conventional instruction. If no significant difference exists or if grades are higher during independent reading, then the case for using this approach is supported. On the other hand, the principal, supervisor, and teachers may observe that although grades decreased slightly during independent reading, the benefits of promoting the lifetime reading habit outweighed the short-term disadvantages of achieving lower grades. Teachers who realize the value of independent reading probably will adjust their grading procedures so that students are not penalized for reading.

- B. Provide support for volunteers from different instructional areas. Similar to working with one department is the principal's efforts in helping interested teachers from other curricular areas. Again, securing appropriate materials is vital for the success of independent reading, but the principal could experience difficulty locating the diversity of resources needed for different subjects. Planning a budget is one solution; however, some schools do not have sufficient funds for purchasing supplementary materials. Another approach is to contact the local public library and to establish a policy of borrowing books, ranging from scientific resources to children's and young adult literature. To further support the need for materials, the principal can work

with the P.T.S.A. in sponsoring a community drive for securing mass circulation magazines, children's magazines, booklets, fictional works, nonfiction books, technical reports, and other print and non-print media. When they arrive at the school, the principal and the teachers who initially volunteered for independent reading organize these sources according to instructional areas.

- C. Encourage the entire staff to explore ways of using independent reading. The busy schedule that teachers and students follow each day causes additional obstacles to independent reading. Students are selected for pull-out programs in computer literacy, gifted education, remedial reading, instrumental lessons, theater arts, and other areas. In addition, they are expected to attend physical education, have lunch, and become involved in extracurricular activities. Although this diversity is supposed to enrich lives, too much of "a good thing" can be counterproductive and can hinder efforts to promote the lifetime reading habit. Consequently, when supporting the use of independent reading, the principal should consider the daily pressures under which teachers and students function.

Worthwhile suggestions are provided by Spiegel (1981). Although she focuses on recreational reading in

the elementary school, her ideas are easily adapted for independent reading, K-12. One of her recommendations is to revise certain practices and schedules so that semifree reading is incorporated into subject matter lessons. For example, the teacher may obtain materials for a temporary minilibrary which supports a current topic of study. Then, the students could be permitted to read self-selected materials concerning the topic during the last 10 minutes of each lesson. Spiegel also suggests that teachers scrutinize the practice of requiring students to complete every activity in a workbook or a teacher manual. If teachers stress only those exercises that are needed, then more time is available for selecting and reading books. Similarly, teachers need to question other routine practices, such as those in their weekly plans, and to find at least 10 minutes a day for independent reading.

Being realistic about independent reading is not accepting defeat. Instead, it suggests a keen awareness of a school's limitations and the wisdom of how to proceed. The principal who realizes the need for moving a step at a time may eventually observe the long-term benefits of his/her efforts.

SUMMARY

Independent reading is a necessary adjunct to a school reading program. If carried out with commitment, it can have a major impact on students' lifetime reading habits. However, with today's emphasis on competency testing and on other priorities, independent reading may become a lost art. Of help is the principal's direct involvement in providing staff development, supporting the link between independent and creative reading, promoting schoolwide efforts, and being realistic about how to proceed. This commitment suggests the need for an administrator who is knowledgeable, has courage, and relates well to teachers. Although the principal's leadership with independent reading is not a panacea, it can significantly affect the future literacy of our society.

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Vita

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